



A Violent Disinterest in Jesus

"Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was its fall."

Jesus Christ,
concluding his Sermon on the Mount

"The danger of the pacifist illusion is its campaign to persuade democracies to ignore the true nature of [Islamic extremist] barbarism and to throw down their defenses in the name of peace... The advocates of this campaign would make the Sermon on the Mount a road map for U.S. foreign policy."

Joseph Loconte, *WSJ.com*
Opinion Journal, November 2005
(emphasis added)

I heard a story recently about a boy in our church's youth ministry who was being harassed by a peer at the middle school they both attended. In the hallway, while teachers weren't looking, the bully would give Joey a hefty shove to provoke a fight. Avoiding a confrontation, Joey would simply shrug him off and walk away. This exchange went on for several weeks until finally the aggressor threw up his arms and asked in exasperation, "Why won't you fight me?" "I don't want to go to hell," Joey replied. This seemed to raise his foe's eyebrows. "What do you mean?" he asked. "Well," Joey replied, "Jesus says not to solve conflicts using violence, so I won't." Such refusal to return evil for evil would make his Sunday school teacher proud. In that

moment, the young boy demonstrated what it means to take Jesus' words seriously and obey them.

Christian *grown-ups* in this country, however, roll their eyes at the suggestion that this tale of childlike, cheek-turning obedience to Jesus would have any relevance to foreign policy and the state's use of force, whether retaliatory or preemptive. "The Sermon on the Mount," adults will reason, "was intended for the interpersonal realm only. After all, King Solomon says there is a *time for war*"—an odd perspective, given that a majority of evangelicals insist on the right to own hand guns. Many high-profile clergy of this persuasion are forthright in their support for war: for example, Southern Baptist Convention's Richard Land, who authored (and cosigned with Bill Bright, James Kennedy, Carl Herbster, and others) an open letter defending the president's decision to invade Iraq. Paralleling them are Catholic academics Jean Beth Elshtain and Richard John Neuhaus, who argue for the morality of Operation Enduring Freedom using just-war tradition as the fundamental basis of authority. Less nuanced are pastors like John Hagee and Pat Robertson who draw on Abrahamic promises to justify actions such as Israel's unrestrained and devastating aerial bombardment of Lebanon.

Another way we allow our faith to accommodate war is by simply failing to question its legitimacy. This was the case in a published response to a *New York Times* article on megachurch pastor Gregory Boyd ("Disowning Conservative Politics, Evangelical Pastor Rattles Flock," July 30, 2006), who lost a fifth of his parishioners after preaching a series of sermons called "The Cross and the Sword." While the *Times* reporter does capture Boyd's exasperation with evangelicals' often single-issue politics, the predominant theme of the article was the seldom-preached warning about the spiritual dangers of nationalism and militarism: "When you put your trust

in the sword, you lose the Cross." In his rebuttal (*Breakpoint Worldview Magazine*, August 1, 2006), Chuck Colson conspicuously circumvents Boyd's message altogether by first taking a shot at the "liberal media," and then focusing exclusively on abortion, portraying Boyd as a pastor engaged in a perilous retreat from the church's historical pro-life position. He avoids altogether Boyd's challenge about the incompatibility of Christian discipleship and bellicose patriotism, the possibility that the way of the Cross puts the church at direct odds with the agenda or methodologies of the state.

Whether we evangelicals make our peace with war (as Pew Center surveys overwhelmingly indicate) through sophisticated rationalization or benign neglect, there seems to be a common thread: a disinterest in what Jesus has to say. Some seek the wisdom of St. Augustine in a post-9/11 world. Others buy Jerry Falwell's assumption that all good Christians should support a strong military (a defense budget that nearly equals all other nations' combined). Still others have reduced the Bible to mere chicken-soup-for-the-soul, relegating the ethical questions of war to those in Washington who are paid to manage the "real world." One might dismiss "Who Would Jesus Bomb?" as a lefty-pacifist bumper slogan, but scant few evangelicals are willing to actually take that question on. Perhaps we, the American church, just need to be honest and confess that we find Jesus' words too untenable to act upon. Only then might we repent and find deliverance from the sinking sand beneath our feet. ■

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